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Letters of Sri Aurobindo

(On Poetry and Literature)

Third Series



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FOREWORD

The letters of Sri Aurobindo included in the present volume deal with a subject different from that of his letters already published in the first two volumes in this Series. These earlier volumes contained letters relating to the philosophy, psychology and practice of his system of Integral Yoga; the present volume is confined only to letters dealing with literary topics, especially those connected with the creation and critical appreciation of poetry. Sri Aurobindo is now well known as a Master-mystic and philosopher and a great poet but very few know that he is also a literary critic of exceptionally fine discernment and unfailing judgment. The faculty of poetic creation is not necessarily combined with the faculty of poetic appreciation and often a distinguished creator of poetry may be a poor judge of his own or other poets' work, but in Sri Aurobindo there is a unique combination of both in a remarkably high degree. His main work in the field of poetic criticism, however, lies embedded in a long series of articles published under the title "The Future Poetry" in the monthly philosophical journal "Arya" which he conducted during the years 1914 to 1921, but this journal has long

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become defunct and it may take many years before these articles are resurrected and made available to the public.

The letters in the present volume reveal a different category of Sri Aurobindo's writing on the subject of literary and poetic criticism. They were not intended to give any systematic and exhaustive treatment of the subject but were written by way of comments or explanatory remarks to a few of his disciples who were writing poetry under his inspiration and direction and who used to submit their work to him for guidance and help, incidentally putting him various questions regarding the inspiration and vision, the form and technique or the style and substance of poetry and sometimes more general questions about literature and art. A very large corpus of this writing relates to a critical examination and appraisal of particular lines or phrases of poems of his poet-disciples but as it would be unintelligible unless read along with the original poems it has been here left out as unsuitable for publication. Only those letters have been selected for inclusion in this volume which discuss poetry or literature in a general way. They have been arranged and grouped under separate sections so as to construct, from these occasional comments made on the works of different poets at different times, as complete a picture as possible of Sri Aurobindo's views on the main issues in the field of literary creation and appreciation.

The intention in making these letters available to the public is that the illuminating advice which Sri Aurobindo

FOREWORD

gave to his few poet-disciples may also prove helpful to others who have a true impulse of literary creation and are in need of sure guidance to direct it on right lines. They will prove of especial help to those who are attempting to write spiritual and mystical poetry, for here Sri Aurobindo is not only a supreme Master himself but also a leader and guide to all who wish to explore the endless vistas of the infinite Spiritual Muse.

23-6-1949

K. H. G.

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SECTION ONE

THE PROCESS, FORM AND SUBSTANCE
OF POETRY

Three Elements of Poetic Creation

POETRY, if it deserves the name at all, comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the outer mind and other external instruments for transmission only. There are here three elements, the original source of inspiration, the vital force of creative beauty which gives its substance and impetus and determines the form, and the transmitting outer consciousness of the poet. The most genuine and perfect poetry is written when the original source is able to throw its inspiration pure and unaltered into the vital and there it takes its true native form and power of speech exactly reproducing the inspiration, while the outer consciousness is entirely passive and transmits without alteration what it receives. When the vital is too active and gives too much of its own initiative or a translation into more or less turbid vital stuff, the poetry remains powerful but is inferior in quality and less authentic. Finally, if the outer consciousness is too lethargic and blocks, or too active and makes its own version, then you have the poetry that fails.

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It is also the interference of these two parts either by obstruction or by too great an activity of their own or by both together that causes the difficulty and labour of writing. There would be no difficulty if the inspiration came through without obstruction or interference in a pure transcription—and that is what happens in a poet's highest or freest moments: when he writes not at all out of his own external human mind but by inspiration, as the mouthpiece of the Gods.

As for the originating source it may be anywhere, the subtle physical plane, the higher or lower vital itself, the dynamic or creative intelligence, the plane of dynamic vision, the psychic, the illumined mind—even, though this is the rarest, the Overmind. To get the Overmind inspiration through is so rare that there are only a few lines or short passages in all poetic literature that give at least some appearance or reflection of it. As for your personal question, it is the original source of D's inspiration and the good will of his vital (emotional) channel that makes his poetry so spontaneous; the psychic inspiration takes at once its true form and speech in the vital and is transmitted without any interference or only a minimum of interference by the brain-mind. That is usually the character of the lyrical inspiration (D's gift is essentially lyrical)—to flow out of the being—

THE PROCESS, FORM AND SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

whether it comes from the vital or the psychic, it is usually spontaneous, for these are the two most powerfully impelling and spontaneous parts of the nature. Your source is on the contrary the creative (poetic) intelligence and, at your best, the illumined mind; but a poetry which comes from this quarter is always apt to be arrested by the outer intellect. This intellect is an absurdly overactive part of the nature; it always thinks that nothing can be well done unless it puts its finger into the pie and therefore it instinctively interferes with the inspiration, blocks half or more than half of it and labours to substitute its own inferior and toilsome productions for the true speech and rhythm that ought to have come. The poet labours in anguish to get the one true word, the authentic rhythm, the real divine substance of what he has to say, while all the time it is waiting complete and ready behind, but is not allowed transmission by some part of the transmitting agency which prefers to try to translate and is not willing merely to receive and transcribe. When you get something through from the illumined mind, then you produce something really fine and great. When you get with labour or without it something reasonably like what the poetic intelligence wanted to say, then you make something fine or adequate, but not great. When the brain is at work trying to

fashion out of itself or to give its own version of what the higher sources are trying to pour down, then you manufacture something either quite inadequate or faulty or, at the best, "good on the whole", but not the thing you ought to write.

2-6-1931

Three Essentials for Writing Poetry

I HAVE gone through your poems. For poetry three things are necessary. First, there must be emotional sincerity and poetical feeling and this your poems show that you possess. Next, a mastery over language and a faculty of rhythm perfected by a knowledge of the technique of poetic and rhythmic expression; here the technique is imperfect, true faculty is there but in the rough and there is not yet an original and native style. Finally, there must be the power of inspiration, the creative energy, and that makes the whole difference between the poet and the good verse-writer. In your poems this is still very uncertain—in some passages it almost comes out, but in the rest it is not evident.

THE PROCESS, FORM AND SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

I would suggest to you not to turn your energies in this direction at present. Allow your consciousness to grow. If when the consciousness develops, a greater energy of inspiration comes, not out of the ordinary but out of the Yogic consciousness, then you can write and, if it is found that the energy not only comes from the true source but is able to mould for itself the true transcription in rhythm and language, can continue.

6-6-1932

Essence of Inspiration

THERE can be inspiration also without words—a certain intensity in the light and force and substance of the knowledge is the essence of inspiration.

18-6-1933

Poetic Fluency

It is precisely the people who are careful, self-critical, anxious for perfection who have interrupted visits from the Muse. Those who don't

mind what they write, trusting to their genius, vigour or fluency to carry it off are usually the abundant writers. There are exceptions, of course. "The poetic part caught in the mere mind" is an admirable explanation of the phenomenon of interruption. Fluent poets are those who either do not mind if they do not always write their very best or whose minds are sufficiently poetic to make even their "not best" verse pass muster or make a reasonably good show. Sometimes you write things that are good enough, but not your best, but both your insistence and mine—for I think it essential for you to write your best always, at least your "level best"—may have curbed the fluency a good deal.

The check and diminution forced on your prose was compensated by the much higher and maturer quality to which it attained afterwards. It would be so, I suppose, with the poetry; a new level of consciousness once attained, there might well be a new fluency. So there is not much justification for the fear.

Inspiration and Effort

FEW poets can keep for a very long time a sustained level of the highest inspiration. The best poetry does

THE PROCESS, FORM AND SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

not usually come by streams except in poets of a supreme greatness though there may be in others than the greatest long-continued wingings at a considerable height. The very best comes by intermittent drops, though sometimes three or four gleaming drops at a time. Even in the greatest poets, even in those with the most opulent flow of riches like Shakespeare, the very best is comparatively rare.

All statements are subject to qualification. What Lawrence states* is true in principle, but in practice most poets have to sustain the inspiration by industry. Milton in his later days used to write every day fifty lines; Virgil nine which he corrected and recorrected till it was within half way of what he wanted. In other words he used to write under any conditions and pull at his inspiration till it came. Usually the best lines, passages, etc. come like that.

Correction by Second Inspiration

It is a second inspiration which has come in improving on the first. When the improving is done

* "One can only write creative stuff when it comes—otherwise it is not much good".

by the mind and not by a pure inspiration then the retouches spoil more often than they perfect.

Joy of Poetic Creation

POETRY can start from any plane of consciousness although like all art—or, one might say, all creation—it must always come through the vital if it is to be alive. And as there is always a joy in creation, that joy along with a certain *enthousiasmos*—not enthusiasm, if you please, but *anandamaya avesh*—must always be there whatever the source. But your poetry differs from the lines you quote. Your inspiration comes from the linking of the vital creative instrument to a deeper psychic experience, and it is that which makes the whole originality and peculiar individual power and subtle and delicate perfection of your poems. It was indeed because this linking-on took place that the true poetic faculty suddenly awoke in you; for it was not there before, at least on the surface. The joy you feel, therefore, was no doubt partly the simple joy of creation, but there comes also into it the joy of expression of the psychic being which was seeking for an outlet since your boyhood. It is this that justifies your poetry-writing as a part of your sadhana.

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Pressure of Creative Formation

I KNOW very well this pressure of a creative formation to express itself and be fulfilled. When it presses like that there is nothing to do but to let it have its way, so as to leave the mind unoccupied and clear; otherwise it will be pushed two ways and would not be in the condition of ease necessary for concentration.

Form and Substance of Poetry

ON the general question the truth seems to me to be very simple. It may be quite true that fine or telling rhythms without substance (substance of idea, suggestion, feeling) are hardly poetry at all, even if they make good verse. But that is no ground for belittling beauty or excellence of form or ignoring its supreme importance for poetic perfection. Poetry is after all an art and a poet ought to be an artist of word and rhythm, even though necessarily, like other artists, he must also be something more than that, even much more. I hold therefore that harshness and roughness are not merits but serious faults to be avoided by anyone who wants his work to be true poetry and survive. One can be strong and

powerful, full of sincerity and substance without being harsh, rough or aggressive to the ear. On one side much of Swinburne's later poetry is a mere body of rhythmic sound without a soul, but what of Browning's constant deliberate harshness and roughness or, let us say, excessive sturdiness (not to speak of much marshy ground and very flat levels), which deprive much of his work of the claim to be poetry, —even when it has force, it fails to be poetry of a high order. For this and other reasons much discredit has fallen upon it and it is fairly certain that posterity will carefully and with good reason forget to read a considerable part of what he has written. Energy enough there is and abundance of matter even when he is not at his best and these carry the day for a time and give fame; but it is only writing perfect in its own kind that endures and brings a sure and self-existent immortality. Or if these cruder portions last it will be only by association with the perfection of the same poet's work at his best. I may say also that if mere rhythmic acrobacies of the kind to which you very rightly object condemn a poet's work to inferiority and a literature deviating on to that line to decadence, the drive towards a harsh strength and rough energy of form and substance may easily lead to another kind of undesirable acrobacy, an opposite road towards individual

THE PROCESS, FORM AND SUBSTANCE OF POETRY

inferiority and general decadence. Why should not Bengali poetry go on to the straight way of its progress without running either upon the rocks of roughness or into the shallows of mere melody? Austerity of course is another matter; rhythm can either be austere to bareness or sweet and subtle, and a harmonious perfection can be attained in either of these extreme directions if the mastery is there.

As for rules—rules are necessary but they are not absolute; one of the chief tendencies of genius is to break old rules and make departures which create new ones. English poetry of today luxuriates in movements which the mind of yesterday would have deprecated as too audaciously novel violences or as archaic license, yet it is evident that this has led to discoveries of new rhythmic beauty with a very real charm and power, however unfortunate some of its results may be. Not the formal mind, but the ear must be the judge.

I do not think the appreciation of poetry like yours is dependent on a new technique; it is, as you say, something in the composition of the nature which responds or does not respond to the new note, that determines the rejection or the acceptance. At the same time the development of this new note—the expression of a deeper yogic or mystic experience.

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in poetry—may very well demand for its fullness new departures in technique, a new turn or turns of rhythm, but these should be, I think, subtle in their difference rather than aggressive.

4-1-1932

Rhythm and Significance

You seem to suggest that significance does not matter and need not enter into the account in judging and feeling poetry....Rhythm and word-music are indispensable but are not the whole of poetry....Certainly the significance and feeling suggested and borne home by the words and rhythms are a capital part of the value of poetry. Shakespeare's lines

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,

have a skilful and consummate rhythm and word-combination, but this gets its full value as the perfect embodiment of a profound and moving significance, the expression in a few lines of a whole range of human world-experience.

Types of Perfection in Poetry

To the two requisites you mention which are technical—"the rightness of individual words and phrases, the rightness of the general lingual reconstruction of the poetic vision,—that is, the manner, syntactical and psychological, of whole sentences and their co-ordination",—two others have to be added, a certain smiling sureness of touch and inner breath of perfect perfection, born not made, in the words themselves, and a certain absolute winging movement in the rhythm. Without an inevitable rhythm there can be no inevitable wording. If you understand all that, you are lucky. But how to explain the inexplicable, something that is self-existent? That simply means an absoluteness, one might say, an inexplicably perfect and in-fitting thisness and thereness and thatness and everythingelness so satisfying in every way as to be unalterable. All perfection is not necessarily inevitability. I have tried to explain in "The Future Poetry"—very unsuccessfully I am afraid—that there are different grades of perfection in poetry: adequateness, effectivity, illumination of language, inspiredness—finally, inevitability. These are things one has to learn to feel, one can't analyse.

All the styles, "adequate", "effective", etc., can be raised to inevitability in their own line.

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The supreme inevitability is something more even than that, a speech overwhelmingly sheer, pure and true, a quintessential essence of convincingly perfect utterance. That goes out of all classifications and is unanalysable. Instances would include the most different kinds of style—Keats' "magic casements", Wordsworth's Newton and his "fields of sleep", Shakespeare's "Macbeth has murdered sleep", Homer's descent of Apollo from Olympus, Virgil's "Sunt lachrymae rerum" and his "O passi Graviora."

Homer's passage translated into English would be perfectly ordinary. He gets the best part of his effect from his rhythm. Translated it would run merely like this: "And he descended from the peaks of Olympus, wroth at heart, bearing on his shoulders arrows and doubly pent-in quiver, and there arose the clang of his silver bow as he moved, and he came made like unto the night." His words too are quite simple but the vowelisation and the rhythm make the clang of the silver bow go smashing through the world into universes beyond while the last words give a most august and formidable impression of godhead.

I don't think there is any co-ordination between the differences of style and the different planes of inspiration—unless one can say that the effective

style comes from the higher mind, the illumined from the illumined mind, the inspired from the plane of intuition. But I don't know whether that would stand at all times—especially when each style reaches its inevitable power.

Poetic Austerity and Exuberance

(1)

It is not easy to say precisely what is austerity in the poetic sense—for it is a quality that can be felt, a spirit in the writer and the writing, but if you put it in the strait-waistcoat of a definition or of a set technical method you are likely to lose the spirit altogether. In the spirit of the writing you can feel it as a something constant, self-gathered, grave and severe; it is the quality that one at once is aware of in Milton, Wordsworth, Aeschylus and which even their most fervent admirers would hardly attribute to Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Euripides. But there is also an austerity in the poetic manner and that is more difficult to describe or to fix its borders. At most one can say that it consists in a will to express the thing of which you write,

thought, object or feeling, in its just form and exact power without addition and without exuberance. The austerer method of poetry avoids all lax superfluity, all profusion of unnecessary words, excess of emotional outcry, self-indulgent daub of colour, over-brilliant scattering of images, all mere luxury of external art or artifice. To use just the necessary words and no others, the thought in its simplicity and bare power, the one expressive or revealing image, the precise colour and nothing more, just the exact impression, reaction, simple feeling proper to the object,—nothing spun out, additional, in excess. Any rioting in words, colour, images, emotions, sound, phrase for their own sake, for their own beauty, attraction, luxury of abundant expression would, I suppose, be what your friend means by *uchchwas*. Even, an extreme contemporary tendency seems to condemn the use of image, epithet, colour, pitch or emphasis of any kind, except on the most sparing scale, as a vice. Length in a poem is itself a sin, for length means padding—a long poem is a bad poem, only brief work, intense, lyrical in spirit can be throughout pure poetry. Milton, for example, considered austere by the common run of mortals, would be excluded from the list of the pure for his sprawling lengthiness, his epic rhetoric, his swelling phrases, his cult of the

grandiose. To be perfect you must be small, brief and restrained, meticulous in cut and style.

This extremism in the avoidance of excess is perhaps itself an excess. Much can be done by bareness in poetry—a poetic nudism if accompanied by either beauty and grace or strength and power has its excellence. There can be a vivid or striking or forceful or a subtle, delicate or lovely bareness which reaches to the highest values of poetic expression. There can be also a compact or a stringent bareness—the kind of style deliberately aimed at by Landor; but this can be very stiff and stilted as Landor is in his more ambitious attempts—although he did magnificent things sometimes, like his lines on Rose Aylmer,—you can see there how emotion itself can gain by a spare austerity in self-expression. But it is doubtful whether all these kinds—Wordsworth's lyrics, for example, the *Daffodils*, the *Cuckoo*—can be classed as austere. On the other hand, there can be a very real spirit and power of underlying austerity behind a considerable wealth and richness of expression. Arnold in one of his poems gives the image of a girl beautiful, rich and sumptuous in apparel on whose body, killed in an accident, was found beneath the sumptuousness, next to the skin, an under-robe of sack-cloth. If that is admitted, then Milton can keep his claim to austerity in spite

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of his epic fullness and Aeschylus in spite of the exultant daring of his images and the rich colour of his language. Dante is, I think, the perfect type of austerity in poetry, standing between the two extremes and combining the most sustained severity of expression with a precise power and fullness in the language which gives the sense of packed riches—no mere bareness anywhere.

But, after all, exclusive standards are out of place in poetry; there is room for all kinds and all methods. Shakespeare was to the French classicists a drunken barbarian of genius; but his spontaneous exuberance has lifted him higher than their willed severity of classical perfection. All depends on the kind one aims at—expressing what is in oneself—and an inspired faithfulness to the law of perfection in that kind. That needs some explanation, perhaps; but I have here perforce to put a dash and finish.

8-10-1932

(2)

I said that Aeschylus like Milton was austere *au fond*—there is as in Dante a high serious restrained power behind all they write; but the outward form

in Milton is grandiose, copious, lavish of strength and sweep, in Aeschylus bold, high-imaged, strong in colour, in Dante full of concise, packed and significantly forceful turn and phrase. These external riches might seem not restrained enough to the purists of austerity: they want the manner and not the *fond* only to be impeccably austere. I did not mean that Dante reached the summit of austerity in this sense; in fact I said he stood between the two extremes of bare austerity and sumptuousness of language. But even in his language there is a sense of *tapasya*, of concentrated restraint in his expressive force. A in his translation of Dante has let himself go in the direction of eloquence more than Dante who is too succinct for eloquence and he has used also a mystical turn of phrase which is not Dante's—yet he has got something of the spirit in the language, something of Dante's concentrated force of expression into his lines. You have spread yourself out even more than A, but still there is the Dantesque in your lines also,—very much so, I should say,—with only this difference that Dante would have put it into fewer words than you do. It is the Dantesque stretching itself out a little—more large-limbed, permitting itself more space.

Aeschylus' manner cannot be described as *uch-chwas*, at least in the sense given to it in my letter.

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He is not carefully restrained and succinct in his language like Dante, but there is a certain royal measure even in his boldness of colour and image which has in it the strength of *tapasya* and cannot be called *uchchwas*. I suppose in Bengali this term is used a little indiscriminately for things that are not quite the same in spirit. If mere use of bold image and fullness of expression, epithet, colour, splendour of phrase is *uchchwas*, apart from the manner of their use, I would say that austerity and *uchchwas* of a certain kind are perfectly compatible. At any rate two-thirds of the poetry hitherto recognised as the best in different literatures comes of a combination of these two elements. If I find time I shall one day try to explain this point with texts to support it.

I don't know the Bengali for austerity. *Gambhirya* and other kindred things are or can be elements of austerity, but are not austerity itself. *Anuchchwas* is not accurate; one can be free from *uchchwas* without being austere. The soul of austerity in poetry as in Yoga is *atmasamyama*; all the rest is variable, the outward quality of the austerity itself may be variable.

9-10-1932

(3)

I am still at a loss what to answer about *uchchwas*, because I still don't understand exactly what your correspondent is aiming at in his criticism. There is not more *uchchwas* in Bengali poetry than in English, if by the word is meant rhetoric, free resort to imagery, prolific weaving of words and ideas and sentiments around what one has to say. Indian poetry in the Sanscritic languages—there are exceptions of course—was for the most part more restrained and classic in taste or else more impressionist and incisive than most English poetry; the qualities or defects noted above came into Bengali under the English influence. I don't see therefore the point of his remark that the English language cannot express the Indian temperament. It is true of course to a certain extent, first, because, no foreign language can express what is intimate and peculiar to a national temperament, it tends at once to become falsified and seems exotic, and especially the imagery or sentiment of one language does not go well with that of another; least of all can the temperament of an oriental tongue be readily transferred into a European tongue. What is perfectly simple and straightforward in one becomes emphatic or over-coloured or strange in the other. But that has

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nothing to do with *uchchwas* in itself. As to emotion—if that is what is meant—your word effusiveness is rather unfortunate, for effusiveness is not praiseworthy in poetry anywhere; but vividness of emotion is no more reprehensible in English than in Bengali poetry. You give as examples of *uchchwas* among other things Madhusudan's style, Tagore's poem to me, a passage from Govindadas. I don't think there is anything in Madhusudan which an English poet writing in Bengali would have hesitated to father. Tagore's poem is written at a high pitch of feeling perfectly intelligible to anyone who had passed through the exaltation of the Swadeshi days, but not more high pitched than certain things in Milton, Shelley, Swinburne. In Govindadas's lines,—let us translate them into English—

Am I merely thine? O Love, I am there
clinging
In every limb of thine—there ever in my
creation and my dissolution—

the idea is one that would not so easily occur to an English poet, it is an erotic mysticism, easily suggested to a mind familiar with the experiences of Vedanta or Vaishnava mystics; but this is not effusiveness, it is intensity—and an English writer

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—e.g. Lawrence—could be quite as intense, but would use a different idea or image.

(4)

There is probably a defect in your solar plexus which makes it refuse to thrill unless it receives a strong punch from poetry—an ornamental, romantic or pathetic punch. But there is also a poetry which expresses things with an absolute truth but without effort, simply and easily, without a word in excess or any laying on of colour, only just the necessary. That kind of achievement is considered as among the greatest things poetry can do.

A phrase, word or line may be quite simple and ordinary and yet taken with another phrase, line or word become the perfect thing.

A line like “Life that is deep and wonder-vast” has what I have called the inevitable quality; with a perfect simplicity and straightforwardness it expresses something in a definite and perfect way that cannot be surpassed; so does “lost in a breath of sound” with less simplicity but with the same inevitability. I do not mean that highly coloured poetry cannot be absolutely inevitable, it can, e.g.

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Shakespeare's "In cradle of the rude imperious surge" and many others. But most often highly coloured poetry attracts too much attention to the colour and its brilliance so that the thing in itself is less felt than the magnificence of its dress. All kinds are legitimate in poetry; poetry can be great or perfect even if it uses simple or ordinary expressions, e.g. Dante simply says "In His will is our peace" and in writing that in Italian produces one of the greatest lines in all poetic utterance.

1-4-1938

Epic Greatness and Sublimity

I DON'T know how I differentiate between the epic and the other kinds of poetic power. Victor Hugo in the 'Légende des Siècles' tries to be epic and often succeeds, perhaps even on the whole. Marlowe is sometimes great or sublime, but I would not call him epic. There is a greatness or sublimity that is epic, there is another that is not epic, but more of a romantic type. Shakespeare's line

In cradle of the rude imperious surge

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is as sublime as anything in Homer or Milton, but it does not seem to me to have the epic ring, while a very simple line can have it, e.g. Homer's

Bē de kat' oulumpoio kerēnōn chōomenos kēr.
(He went down from the peaks of Olympus
wroth at heart)

or Virgil's

Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
Fortunam ex aliis

or Milton's

Fallen cherub, to be weak is miserable.

What is there in these lines that is not in Shakespeare's and makes them epic (Shakespeare's of course has something else as valuable)? For the moment at least, I can't tell you, but it is there. A tone of the inner spirit perhaps, expressing itself in the rhythm and the turn of the language.... Dante has the epic spirit and tone, what he lacks is the epic élan and swiftness. The distinction you draw—'epic sublimity has a more natural turn of

imagination. One has only to compare Homer's magnificent lines absolute in their nobility of restrained yet strong emotion, in which the words and rhythm give the very soul of the emotion, but in its depth, not with any outward vehemence. In the fourth quotation:

Heard Thetis' foul petition and wished in any wise
The splendour of the burning ships might satiate
his eyes

—the first line has the ordinary ballad movement and diction and cannot rank, the second is very fine poetry, vivid, powerful, impressive, with a beginning of grandeur—but the nobility of Homer, Virgil or Milton is not there. The line strikes at the mind with a great vehemence in order to impress it—nobility in poetry enters in and takes possession with an assured gait by its own right. It would seem to me that one has only to put the work of these greater poets side by side with Chapman's best to feel the difference. Chapman no doubt lifts rocks and makes mountains suddenly to rise—in that sense he has elevation or rather elevations; but in doing it he gesticulates, wrestles, succeeds finally with a shout of triumph; that does not give a noble effect or a noble movement. See in contrast with what a self-

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possessed grandeur, dignity or godlike ease Milton, Virgil, Homer make their ascensions or keep their high levels.

Then I come to Arnold's example of which you question the nobility on the strength of my description of one essential of the poetically noble. Mark that the calm, self-mastery, beautiful control which I have spoken of as essential to nobility is a poetic, not an ethical or Yogic calm and control. It does not exclude the poignant expression of grief or passion, but it expresses it with a certain high restraint so that even when the mood is personal it yet borders on the widely impersonal. Cleopatra's words* are an example of what I mean; the disdainful compassion for the fury of the chosen instrument of self-destruction which vainly thinks it can truly hurt her, the call to death to act swiftly and yet the sense of being high above what death can do, which

*If thou and nature can so gently part,
The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
Which hurts and is desir'd.

.....

.....Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
Of life at once untie: poor venomous fool,
Be angry, and despatch.

—Shakespeare

these few simple words convey has the true essence of nobility. "Impatience" only! You have not caught the significance of the words "poor venomous fool", the tone of the "Be angry and despatch", the tense and noble grandeur of the suicide scene with the high light it sheds on Cleopatra's character. For she was a remarkable woman, a great queen, a skilful ruler and politician, not merely the erotic intriguer people make of her. Shakespeare is not good at describing greatness, he poetised the *homme moyen*, but he has caught something here. The whole passage stands on a par with the words of Antony "I am dying, Egypt, dying" (down to "A Roman by a Roman, valiantly vanquished") which stand among the noblest expressions of high, deep, yet collected and contained emotion in literature—though that is a masculine and this a feminine nobility. There is in the ballad of Sir Patrick Spense the same poignancy and restraint—something that gives a sense of universality and almost impersonality in the midst of the pathetic expression of sorrow. There is a quiver but a high compassionate quiver, there is no wail or stutter or vehemence. As for the rhythm, it may be the ballad "alive", but it is not "kicking"—and it has the overtones and undertones which ballad rhythm has not at its native level. Then for the other example

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you have given—lines didactic in intention can be noble, as for instance, the example quoted by Arnold from Virgil,

Disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem,
Fortunam ex aliis,

or the line quoted from Apollo's speech about the dead body of Hector and Achilles' long-nourished and too self-indulgent rage against it. Dryden's two lines,

Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
But leave to heaven the measure and the choice,

are less fine and harmonious in their structure; there is something of a rhetorical turn and therefore it reaches a lower height of nobility, but nobility there is, especially in the second line of the couplet. I do not find it cold; there is surely a strong touch of poetic emotion there.

I may say, however, that grandeur and nobility are kindred but not interchangeable terms. One can be noble without reaching grandeur—one can be grand without the subtle quality of nobility. Zeus Olympius is grand and noble; Ravana or Briareus with the thousand arms is grand without being

noble. Lear going mad in the storm is grand, but too vehement and disordered to be noble. I think the essential difference between the epic movement and ballad rhythm and language lies in this distinction between nobility and force—in the true ballad usually a bare, direct and rude force. The ballad metre has been taken by modern poets and lifted out of its normal form and movement, given subtle turns and cadences and made the vehicle of lyric beauty and fervour or of strong or beautiful narrative; but this is not the true original ballad movement and ballad motive. Scott's movement is narrative, not epic—there is also a lyrical narrative movement and that is the quality reached by Coleridge, perhaps the finest use yet made of the ballad movement. It is doubtful whether the ballad form can bear the epic lift for more than a line or two, a stanza or two—under the epic stress the original jerkiness remains while the lyric flow smooths it out. When it tries to lift to the epic height, it does so with a jerk, an explosive leap or a quick canter; one feels the rise, but there is still something of the old trot underneath the movement. It is at least what I feel throughout in Chesterton—there is a sense of effort, of disguise with the crudity of the original form still showing through the brilliantly coloured drapery that has been put upon it. If there

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is no claim to epic movement I do not mind and can take it for what it can give, but comparisons with Homer and Virgil and the classic hexameter are perilous and reveal the yawning gulf between the two movements. As to the line of fourteen syllables, Chapman often overcomes its difficulties but the jogtrot constantly comes out. It may be that all that can be surmounted but Chapman and Chesterton do not surmount it—whatever their heights of diction or imagination, the metre interferes with their maintenance, even, I think, with their attaining their full eminence. Possibly a greater genius might wipe out the defect—but would a greater genius have cared to make the endeavour?

I have left myself no space or time for Chesterton as a poet and it is better so because I have not read "The Ballad of the White Horse" and know him only by extracts. Your passages establish him as a poet, a fine and vivid poet by intervals, but not as a great or an epic poet—that is my impression. Sometimes I find your praise of particular passages extravagant, as when you seem to put Marlowe's mighty line

See, see where Christ's blood streams in the
firmament

and Chesterton's facetious turn about the stretched necks and burned beards on a par. Humour can be poetic and even epic, like Kaikeyi's praise of Manthara's hump in the Ramayana; but this joke of Chesterton's does not merit such an apotheosis. That is ballad style, not mighty or epic. Again all that passage about Colan and Earl Harold is poor ballad stuff—except the first three lines and the last two—poor in diction, poor in movement. I am unable to enthuse over

It smote Earl Harold over the eye
And blood began to run.

The lines marrying the soft sentimentalism of the "small white daisies" with the crude brutality of the "blood out of the brain" made me at first smile with the sense of the incongruous, it seemed almost like an attempt at humour—at least at the grotesque. I prefer Scott's Tunstall; in spite of its want of imagination and breadth it is as good a thing as any Scott has written; on the contrary, these lines show Chesterton far below his best. The passage about the cholera and wheat is less flat; it is even impressive in a way, but impressive by an exaggerated bigness and forced attempt at epic greatness on one side and a forced and exaggerated childish sentimentalism

on the other. The two do not fuse and the contrast is grotesque. This cholera image might be fine out of its context, it is at least forceful and vivid, but applied to a man (not a god or a demigod) it sounds too inflated—while the image of the massacrer muttering sentimentally about bread while he slew is so unnatural as to tread on or over the borders of the grotesque—it raises even a smile like the poor small white daisies red with blood out of Earl Harold's brain. I could criticise further, but I refrain. On the other hand, Chesterton is certainly very fine by flashes. His images and similes and metaphors are rather explosive, sometimes they are mere conceits like the "cottage in the clouds", but all the same they have very often a high poetic quality of revealing vividness. At times also he has fine ideas finely expressed and occasionally he achieves a great lyrical beauty and feeling. He is terribly unequal and unreliable, violent, rocketlike, ostentatious, but at least in parts of this poem he does enter into the realms of poetry. Only, I refuse to regard the poem as an epic—a sometimes low-falling, sometimes high-swinging lyrical narrative is the only claim I can concede to it.